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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001473

SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY ANKARA PASS TO AMCONSUL ADANA  
AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO USOFFICE ALMATY  
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF  
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL LEIPZIG  
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA  
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG  
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI  
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK  
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG  
AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PASS TO AMEMBASSY GRENADA  
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PASS TO AMCONSUL QUEBEC  
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PASS TO AMCONSUL RECIFE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2024/11/17

TAGS: PGOV KDEM VE

SUBJECT: RE: MUNICIPALITY CONTINUES TO RESIST CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

REF: 09 CARACAS 777; 09 CARACAS 750; 09 CARACAS 322; 09 CARACAS 1188

CLASSIFIED BY: DUDDY, AMBASSADOR, DOS, AMB; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: Government of Venezuela (GBRV) authorities continue to block efforts by Caracas' opposition led municipality of Chacao to build a new civic center on the former site of a popular weekend market. Opposition Chacao Mayor Emilio Grateron ordered construction to begin on November 13, calling upon Chacao residents to defend the civic center project against a small group of pro-Chavez squatters who were refusing to leave the plot of land. National Guard troops used tear gas to repel a small group of the Mayor's supporters on November 13, successfully preventing the Mayor from evicting the squatters. Chacao officials vowed on November 14 to pursue legal means to evict the squatters. The battle for control of this small plot of land has become a symbol of the struggle of the opposition led governments to govern in the face of ever-greater encroachments by the central government. End Summary.

BATTLE LINES DRAWN

**¶2.** (SBU) Following the October 2008 inauguration of a modern multi-story building to house the "new" Chacao market, located adjacent to the plot of land where the old market once stood, the Chacao municipality invited the vendors to use the new market. All but eight vendors relocated to the new facility. These eight vendors occupied the old location full-time, refusing to leave the site but not selling merchandise either. That same month, following public disclosure of the municipality's 2001 plan to construct a civic center at the site, the Ministry of Culture's Institute of Cultural Heritage designated the old Chacao market building a "National Heritage Site," effectively blocking the plans of the opposition Mayor to build the civic center for his affluent, overwhelmingly opposition-oriented community. On June 14, 2009, the municipality held a referendum in which over 99% of Chacao's voters supported the civic center project (Ref A).

BATTLE FOR THE CIVIC CENTER

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¶3. (SBU) The site of the future civic center has been occupied by a small group of militant Chavistas and members of Chavez's newly created "camps" of armed supporters, known as "Barrio Nuevo, Barrio Tricolor," who refuse to vacate the site. They are aided by National Guard troops, who are occupying municipal land. The location is adorned with PSUV flags, socialist posters, and a giant multi-story gyrating "sky puppet" of Chavez. (Note: Part of the site planned for the civic center and a school is not covered under the Institute of Cultural Heritage's designation, since it is made up of empty municipality land purchased separately. The National Guard is occupying that land, without, according to Chacao officials, any pretense at a legal right to do so. End Note.)

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¶4. (SBU) On November 13, the day that construction was slated to begin, Mayor Grateron called upon Chacao residents to defend the civic center project against the pro-Chavez squatters who were refusing to leave the site. Several hundred opposition supporters demonstrated outside the construction site. The Mayor presented a made-for-TV dramatic presentation to the National Guard of the documentation authorizing construction to begin. The Mayor and his supporters were physically pushed back by approximately 50 National Guard troops, who used tear gas to repel the group, and successfully prevented the municipality from evicting the pro-Chavez tenants.

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MAYOR'S BATTLE PLANS "B" AND "C"

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¶5. (SBU) On November 14, Mayor Grateron met with community members to discuss his next steps. Grateron said he was determined to expel the squatters via legal means, and would explore filing a complaint with prosecutors to denounce the "invasion" of municipal property. He told supporters that, if needed, he would hold civic events in the surrounding streets of the locale, and most likely would continue with plans to build a parking garage for the future civic center while the legal process unfolded. Grateron told the media on October 15, "We not only have a plan A, but also a plan B and a plan C."

¶6. (C) Comment: The GBRV has continued to try to strip opposition state and local officials of authority and resources (Ref D). This battle over a small piece of highly valuable land in an affluent opposition-municipality of Caracas is symbolic of the broader struggle of opposition officials to govern in the face of Chavez' legislative, legal, and police tactics to undercut their authority and effectiveness. End Comment.

DUDDY